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Hard Targets: Reviewing the Attacks on CIA's Gulf War Analysis

The Central Intelligence Agency provided an unprecedented variety of analyses to policymakers and commanders during the crisis that followed Iraq's seizure of Kuwait in August 1990. The contribution that CIA and Intelligence Community analysts made to the victory of Operation Desert Storm in 1991 has been applauded by decisionmakers from President George Bush to the working levels of virtually every department and service. Nevertheless, critics have accused the Agency of (among other things) neglecting to warn policymakers that Iraq was about to invade Kuwait, of politicizing its assessment of Baghdad's ability to hold Kuwait in the face of global economic sanctions, and of overestimating the residual strength of the Iraqi army on the eve of the coalition's ground offensive to liberate Kuwait.¹ The full history of CIA analysis in the crisis has not been written, but a fairer examination of the Agency's performance in these three instances is possible and perhaps overdue. Such a review shows that in all three cases the Directorate of Intelligence provided accurate, timely, and objective information to policymakers. Closer looks at two of the cases, however, show how even accurate analyses can be resented by consumers faced with urgent and momentous decisions.

Sudden Crisis

The cliche that the origins of the next war tend to be found in the last one hardly helped CIA analysts in 1990 to predict the behavior of Iraq and its volatile strongman, Saddam Husayn. Iraq had spent most of the last decade at war with neighboring Iran, and many observers

¹ See, for instance, Angelo Codevilla, "Get Smart—Eliminate the CIA," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 January 1995.

believed that Saddam would lie quiet for some time to come. Saddam—if he did go looking for military adventures—seemed unlikely to lash out at his Arab neighbors (who had more or less assisted his fight against Iran). [redacted]

In the meantime, US policymakers hoped to moderate Saddam's behavior. The Bush administration's cautiously optimistic policy toward Iraq, secretly outlined in National Security Directive 26 (October 1989), received support a month later from the Intelligence Community in the form of a new National Intelligence Estimate, NIE 36.2-89, which had been several months in drafting. "Over the next three years Iraq will pursue largely restrained foreign policies that will not seriously threaten US interests and allies in the region," predicted the estimate's Key Judgments. Saddam's projected good behavior, however, would not represent a change of heart, but rather a tactical bow to "political and economic realities." Saddam still wanted to improve Iraq's strategic position vis-a-vis its neighbors. Baghdad would accelerate its development of weapons of mass destruction and perhaps even try to gain control—although probably not by force—of the Kuwaiti islands of Warbah and Bubiyan, which stood astride Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf. In addition, "Increased [Iraqi] oil exports will increase tensions with Saudi Arabia and other key OPEC oil producers," NIE 36.2-89 predicted.² This particular prediction would soon come true. [redacted]

[redacted]
Saddam took no steps to demobilize his million-man army, the world's fourth-largest.

[redacted]
The implicit threat became explicit a few weeks later when Saddam, announcing that Baghdad possessed binary chemical weapons, [redacted]

Despite these developments, however, Iraqi-Kuwaiti tensions seemed only a little higher. DI analysts later concluded that Saddam had decided in early 1990 to prepare for an invasion of Kuwait. Republican Guard troops captured in the war claimed that they began training for a large operation that May, although they were not told where they would be sent. [redacted]

[redacted] In June, Iraqi officials visited Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates—both members, with Iraq, of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)—to badger both principalities to stop overfilling their oil production quotas.⁴ Baghdad needed higher prices for its own oil in order to maintain its huge military and to keep its economy on the path of recovery, and consistent over-quota sales by Kuwait and several other OPEC states had contributed to a fall in the average price from \$20 a barrel in January 1990 to \$14 a barrel the following June. [redacted]

The Kuwaitis felt pressured but not threatened by Iraq until 17 July, when Saddam used the anniversary of Iraq's Ba'ath revolution to threaten unspecified Arab countries with retaliation if they did not cut their oil production back to their OPEC quotas. To ensure that Kuwait understood Saddam, Iraqi diplomats passed around a lengthy indictment at the Arab League meeting then in progress in Tunis. The note accused Kuwait of "direct aggression against Iraq." Kuwait had driven down oil prices, encroached on Iraqi territory during the recent war, and even stolen Iraqi oil from fields that stretched into Kuwaiti territory. This last claim surprised everyone; Baghdad had never before made such an accusation, which American diplomats judged "egregious in its tone and substance." Nevertheless, the US Embassy in Baghdad told Washington, the prospect of war was still "implausible." Saddam merely wanted debt forgiveness and perhaps Bubiyan and Warbah Islands as well, the Embassy believed; his demands were limited, despite his clumsy rhetoric.⁵ Kuwaiti authorities nevertheless took Saddam's threats seriously, quietly putting the kingdom's small defense force on alert.⁶ [redacted]

The Directorate of Intelligence published its first analysis of the crisis in the 19 July edition of the National Intelligence Daily (NID). [redacted]

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to Baghdad and announced on 22 July that he had elicited a pledge from Saddam not to attack Kuwait. The Kuwaitis lowered the alert status of their defense force in response to this news. [redacted]

Kuwait pledged on 26 July to cut its oil production and support OPEC efforts to drive the world price of oil to \$21 per barrel. This concession suggested to many observers that Saddam had won his point and would ease his pressure on Kuwait.¹⁵ CIA analysis briefly reflected the worldwide hope for a negotiated solution. Kuwait had offered Baghdad \$1 billion in "compensation" for supposedly pumping oil from Iraq's portion of the Rumalyah field, and the NID for 26 July commented that Saddam probably believed he would soon win additional economic concessions. The Kuwaitis had gained scant sympathy in the Arab world during the crisis and knew there was little chance of getting quick military help from outside if Iraq should attack.¹⁶ [redacted]

For the next few days CIA analysts tracked Iraq's deployments and waited for the start of the repeatedly delayed Iraq-Kuwait negotiations. On July 30 Saddam's entire Republican Guard was deployed; seven divisions comprising more than 750 tanks and 700 artillery pieces with nearly complete logistical and operational support. All they needed was the order to go.¹⁷ [redacted]

Iraqi and Kuwaiti diplomats finally convened in Jeddah late on 31 July in preparation for bilateral talks the following morning [redacted]

By the morning of 1 August, it became clear to CIA analysts that Saddam had ordered an invasion. An armored force was rumbling right up to the border, and combat aircraft were staging at forward airbases.¹⁸ [redacted]

¹⁵ Edward Cody, "OPEC, in Harmony Again, Nears Price-Rise Accord," *The Washington Post*, 27 July 1990. [redacted]

[redacted] A press report subsequently claimed that DCI Webster and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell became convinced on 28 July that Iraq would invade. KH-11 imagery of that date, according to *Newsday*, showed trucks stockpiling supplies with the Republican Guard divisions on the Kuwaiti border; Patrick J. Sloyan, "Caught Short: How US Misread Hussein's Intention," *Newsday*, 20 September 1990. [redacted]

Director of Central Intelligence William Webster briefed President Bush that morning and told him that Saddam was about to attack. Although Webster passed along his analysts' judgment that it was still not certain just what sort of incursion Saddam intended, the DCI also told the President that the National Intelligence Officer for Warning, Charles Allen, was predicting Saddam would seize and hold all of Kuwait. Deputy Director for Central Intelligence Richard Kerr reiterated Webster's warning at an emergency meeting of the National Security Council's (NSC) Deputies Committee that morning.²⁰ Afterward the President convened an NSC meeting to discuss the situation and US options, and the State Department made what would be its final remonstrations with Iraqi officials in Baghdad and Washington. Another Deputies Committee conference took place around 1800 that evening. By this point, no one questioned the prediction of an imminent attack. For the next few hours, there was nothing to do but wait. [redacted]

CIA analysts did as well as they could have in predicting Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. After Baghdad had publicly threatened Kuwait in mid-July, the Directorate of Intelligence issued clear warnings that Saddam could and might well invade his neighbor. Indeed, the DI's estimation of Saddam's plans proved better than the predictions shared with US officials by Iraq's Arab neighbors. The DI's warnings were as timely as possible. [redacted]

Marching to War [redacted]

Saddam's lightning invasion and subsequent annexation of Kuwait prompted the United States to organize a multinational coalition of states determined to prevent an Iraqi attack on Saudi Arabia and, if possible, to persuade Saddam to quit his ill-gotten "19th province." On 8 November 1990, President Bush publicly vowed to double the size of the American deployment in the Gulf and ordered VII Corps, which for many years had guarded West Germany, to proceed to Saudi Arabia. The import of these steps was obvious to Saddam and all the world; they meant that the coalition was preparing to make war on Iraq to reclaim Kuwait. President Bush's decision also raised, with greater urgency, the Constitutional issue that Congress and the White House had left unsettled since the initial Desert Shield deployments the previous August.

²⁰ US News & World Report, *Triumph Without Victory: The History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Times Books, 1993 [1992]), p. 33. [redacted]

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Conclusion

The three examples of Gulf War analysis in this essay have ample precedents in the Agency's history but, nonetheless, portend new political realities for CIA. Criticism of the Agency for not predicting Saddam's invasion of Kuwait echoed complaints from earlier crises. Many of those earlier complaints were equally misplaced, in part because no intelligence service has yet found a reliable way to divine the short-term intentions of hard-target regimes. Intelligence Community disputes over Iraq's staying power also echoed earlier controversies. DCI Webster found that policymakers welcome analysis that supports their policies but resent being second-guessed when a decision has already been made.



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armored units probably would be offset by the simultaneous improvement of its defensive preparations.²⁷ In the heat of the moment, with Congressional nerves edgy from two days of emotional debate, some members apparently did not notice the subtle but important differences in the questions posed to CIA and the answers returned. [redacted]

The storm passed almost as quickly as it had risen. On the afternoon of 12 January, both houses passed resolutions endorsing the Administration's policy. Speaker of the House Thomas Foley—who had opposed the resolution—announced the result with a plea: "Let us come together after this vote without recrimination...We are all Americans here—not Democrats, not Republicans."²⁸

The flap in Congress over the "politicization" of CIA assessments was hardly the first time that CIA analysis on a disputed policy matter had itself become controversial. Before the 1990s, however, the disputes had been internal executive-branch arguments related to the wisdom of competing alternative policies; the interagency dispute over SNIE 36.2-90 that December marked a classic example. Indeed, the fact that that argument grew so heated suggests in hindsight that there was no way for the Director of Central Intelligence to avoid further controversy once the debate over the necessity of using force moved to Capitol Hill. One Congressional side or the other would have resented the Agency's judgment, whether that judgment had been seen as supportive or unsupportive of President Bush's determination to fight if Iraq ignored the UN's withdrawal deadline. [redacted]

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Judge William H. Webster

Although both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue agreed that the President, by virtue of his power as commander in chief, could put Americans in harm's way even in the absence of a declaration of war, the White House still needed and wanted Congress to endorse its expensive and potentially dangerous policy. Congressmen thus debated not only the merits of the President's aims in the Gulf, but also the extent of his Constitutional obligation to consult with Congress before committing the

flag abroad. Both Congress and the administration needed the best available intelligence while assessing alternative strategies for dealing with Saddam. At the same time, the sharp disagreements among members on both sides of the debate meant that CIA analysts had to work hard to keep their products free of any hint of policy advocacy. [redacted]

The growing possibility of a ground war in Kuwait soon focused Congressional attention on the intelligence about Saddam's intentions and staying power. At the behest of Les Aspin, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, DCI Webster assessed in open session the effects of the UN-mandated economic sanctions on Iraq in early December. The embargo had damaged the Iraqi economy, Webster testified, but Iraq's military and vital industries, so far, appeared unscathed. Webster offered "no assurance or guarantee that economic hardships [would] compel Saddam to change his policies." Webster's testimony seemed to fit with Chairman Aspin's hawkish line on Iraq; in a summary of the hearings later prepared by Aspin, the Chairman cited the DCI repeatedly to support his (Aspin's) argument that sanctions alone could not force Saddam out of Kuwait.²¹ [redacted]

A Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE 36.2-90) tried in December to answer the crucial question of the moment: Could Saddam be induced to leave Kuwait without a war? SNIE 36.2-90 concluded that Saddam was "not yet convinced" that he faced a devastating attack if he did not quit Kuwait. Analysts from the various agencies disagreed over what it would take to convince him. The intelligence representatives of all four armed services, joined by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), argued in a footnote that Saddam could not be convinced "short of war itself."²² [redacted]

The Intelligence Community's internal disagreement spilled over into the press even before the new SNIE had been briefed to the National Security Council. DCI Webster, in a 15 December session with editors of *The Washington Post*, predicted Saddam would not quit Kuwait unless he was convinced he was "in peril of imminent military attack."²³ [redacted]

²¹ United States Congress, House of Representatives, "Crisis in the Persian Gulf: Sanctions, Diplomacy and War," Committee on Armed Services, 101st Congress, 2d Session, 1990, pp. 112-115. Aspin's comment on the testimony was titled "The Role of Sanctions in Securing US Interests in the Persian Gulf," 21 December 1990, *Ibid.*, pp. 851-869. Bob Woodward claims Aspin had decided America would have to fight by the time he wrote his report; *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1991), p. 345. [redacted]

²² George Lardner, Jr., "No Iraq Move Seen Until Attack Near," *The Washington Post*, 15 December 1990. [redacted]

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Subsequent news stories based on the Webster interview changed the emphasis of the DCI's assessment, making it sound as if Webster had said Saddam would withdraw once he knew an attack was coming. This bit of "CIA analysis" elicited a harsh reaction from anonymous Pentagon and administration sources, who told reporters there was no sign of any Iraqi willingness to withdraw and that the CIA had based its conclusion on seconchand analysis performed by desk-bound analysts.²⁴

The internal Intelligence Community misunderstandings over SNIE 36.2-90 gave Webster and the DI a preview of what was to come just a few weeks later, when both houses of Congress debated resolutions of support for committing US troops to compel Saddam to obey the United Nations' demand that he withdraw from Kuwait by 15 January 1991. On 6 January Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole and Speaker of the House Thomas Foley publicly predicted that their respective houses would authorize force if formally asked to do so by the President. With this and other assurances of ultimate success, President Bush on 8 January submitted his request that the House and Senate pass resolutions backing the use of force. Both houses opened passionate debates over the President's request. The arguments generally fell into two camps; one side urged patience while economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure weakened Baghdad's resolve, and the Administration's allies claimed that sanctions and diplomacy had already failed and that the coalition's will to fight would erode if the liberation of Kuwait were delayed.

CIA analysis became the focus of Congressional debate on 10 January. House Armed Services Committee Chairman Les Aspin, that afternoon, released the text of a note signed by DCI Webster. (It had been prepared by the Directorate of Intelligence, at Aspin's behest, on the night of 9 January.) "The ability of Iraqi ground forces to defend Kuwait and southern Iraq is unlikely to be substantially eroded over the next six- to 12-months even if effective sanctions can be maintained," Webster explained. In light of this assumption, "[o]ur judgment remains that, even if the sanctions continue to be enforced for another six

months to 12 months, economic hardship alone is unlikely to compel Saddam Husayn to retreat from Kuwait or cause regime-threatening popular discontent in Iraq."²⁵

Webster's letter essentially reiterated and updated his December testimony, but several members of Congress reacted angrily to the un-welcome message by publicly accusing Webster of trimming Agency analysis to fit the Administration's war policy. The members' ire seemed prompted more by Rep. Aspin's immediate publicizing of the 10 January letter than by its contents, but that was small consolation for Webster and CIA. Supporters of the use of force waved the Webster letter as proof that sanctions would not work. More than a few opponents resented the DCI's message, which seemed to fit with the Administration's apparent strategy of daring Congress to take the politically risky course of forcing the United States to back away from its commitments in the Gulf. Webster's critics included some formidable Senators: Select Intelligence Committee Chairman David Boren said the Agency seemed to be trying not to "undermine" the Bush Administration, and Majority Leader George Mitchell said the DCI's conclusions had run "directly contrary to the facts [he] presented." Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) responded to the flap by introducing a short-lived but much-publicized "End of the Cold War Act of 1991," which would have (among other things) abolished CIA and transferred its functions to the State Department.²⁶

Some of the controversy over the Director's letter doubtless arose from a misunderstanding about the questions to be answered in the two CIA judgments. In December DCI Webster had been asked by the Armed Services Committee to assess the overall effects of sanctions and to predict their influence on Baghdad's decisionmaking. The Director stated that sanctions were hurting Iraq, but probably not enough to force Saddam out of Kuwait. In January, Chairman Aspin asked a similar but significantly different set of questions, in effect soliciting an Agency judgment on whether the Iraqis could offset the erosion of their military readiness under economic sanctions by using the extra time to strengthen their fortifications in Kuwait. The DI's answer was yes, they could: "On balance, the marginal decline of combat power in Baghdad's

²⁴ John Cassidy and Marie Colvin, "Accusations fly as Iraq cancels White House meeting with Bush," *Sunday Times*, 16 December 1990.

²⁵ William Webster, Director of Central Intelligence to Rep. Les Aspin, 10 January 1991. See also Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 293.

²⁶ Sam Vincent Meddis, "Critics Charge CIA Analysis is Politically Biased," *USA Today*, 14 January 1991. Peter Ridell, "Middle East in Crisis," *Financial Times*, 15 January 1991.

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[redacted] NESA analysts summarized the cables from US diplomats in Baghdad and Kuwait and commented that Saddam probably intended to increase the pressure on Kuwait to reduce oil production before the semiannual OPEC ministerial scheduled to meet in Geneva the following week. Kuwait had resisted Iraqi intimidation in the past, noted the NID Brief, and the Kuwaitis would almost certainly do so again.⁷

Saddam's threats looked more ominous on 20 July, when [redacted] tanks and artillery of his elite Republican Guard were massing in southern Iraq.⁸ For the next few days CIA officers and analysts strained to discern Saddam's plans while tensions escalated and the Iraqi army deployed along the Kuwaiti border.

The Iraqi deployments compelled DI offices to move the dispute to the top of their already crowded analytical agendas. [redacted]

[redacted] On 24 July, the NID reported that infantry and support units were moving to support the two armored divisions already near the border; CIA analysts predicted that Saddam was likely to take some sort of military action if the Kuwaitis resisted pressure to cut oil production and provide financial aid to Iraq at the upcoming OPEC ministerial.⁹

The DI reached a psychological watershed on the following day, 25 July, when the NID's by now daily article on the crisis concluded "Iraq probably is not bluffing; to accept less than satisfaction of its demands for reduced oil production and cash...would be a humiliating retreat." An Iraqi attack would probably be limited in its nature and objectives, but "the force Iraq is building along the Kuwaiti border, however, will be able to carry out any military operation Saddam decides to undertake."¹⁰

Despite this timely judgment, the central question for CIA analysts remained that of Saddam's intent. [redacted]

[redacted] Arab leaders and diplomats offered the same interpretation to the White House. King Hussein of Jordan and President Mubarak of Egypt told the Bush administration there was little danger of war and hence little need for an American response.¹⁴ For about a week the Kuwaitis and everyone else had operated on this assumption. Kuwait enlisted Mubarak and Saudi King Fahd to mediate the dispute. Mubarak promptly flew

¹⁴ Carlyle Murphy, "Mubarak Says Iraq, Kuwait Will Begin Talks This Weekend," *The Washington Post*, 26 July 1990.

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